

“Fake” memes: a new subgenre of the internet meme

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Background

The term meme was coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976. It was originally defined as a “social gene” or a “unit of imitation” (Dawkins 191). Dawkins states memes are ideas or objects that spread through society and adapt; examples include architecture and fashion. The definition of “meme” has evolved to describe a popular idea that spreads rapidly through social media. As internet memes grow they are remade and repurposed. Mainly internet memes are viewed as a form of comedic entertainment; however, they also confront ideas such as politics and social causes (Wang & Wang 264).

Although not a new term, “fake news” has recently been used to describe news that reveals unflattering truths about people or organizations, but in actuality fake news is fictitious news articles parading as factual (Bowman 76). These articles usually appear on fabricated news sites that imitate prominent news outlets, such as ABC news. The purpose of fake news articles and memes is to garner attention and likes. In order to create an engaged audience, memes and fake news must have interesting headlines or text attached. In addition, they most often feature a photo or a video (He et al. 2).

Memes are repurposed by internet users. Highly viral memes spread across multiple social media platforms. Viral memes are typically connected by a unifying topic. Examples of these, defined by Shifman, include “LOLCats” (110-111), “Rage Comics” (113- 115), and “Recut [movie] Trailers” (109). These memes and how they are repurposed by Internet users create meme genres. Bradley Wiggins and G. Bret Bowers established memes as a genre and their different forms: “Our genre development of memes demonstrates the generative capacity for continued memetic transformation and for participation among members of digital culture” (1886). Meme subgenres, as described by Limor Shifman, categorize viral memes and their functions.

Introduction

Both memes and fake news have become popularized through social media by internet users. Fake news is not a new occurrence, but in 2016 the circulation of fake news articles reached unprecedented levels (Bowman 76). My research question for this project is, do memes and fake news influence each other and if so how? Through my research I have found that memes are an important influence on the spread and the creation of fake news. Through my findings, a new meme sub genre became evident: the “fake” meme.



Figure 1: Fake News Meme

This meme demonstrates how even the term fake news was popularized by memes. Following a press conference in which President Trump called CNN fake news, this meme started trending on Twitter.

Methods

I researched the most popular fake news articles from 2016 and then searched to see if any memes related to or addressed the article topics. Because fake news articles are now being more heavily regulated on social media, I could not search for the top articles on the platforms from which they were shared, like Facebook.

So, I turned to Buzzsumo, a site that archives social media engagement on Facebook, Linkedin, Twitter, Pinterest, and Google+ for news articles. Once I identified the highest viewed and shared fake news articles, I searched knowyourmeme.com to find if any of the fake news article topics were also viral memes. Knowyourmeme.com is a database that catalogs popular memes and links back to the original content that has gone viral, as well as popular subsequent memes derived from the original meme. I also searched Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, and Reddit in order to find the original source of the viral memes.



Figure 2: Correlating Viral Fake News Articles and Memes

This figure shows six of the 19 most viral fake news articles of 2016, and their meme counterparts. This figure represents the virality of fake news articles on facebook and the reach memes have on all social media platforms.

Results

After researching the top 50 fake news articles from 2016 on Buzzsumo, I found 19 of the top articles correlate to a viral meme. In Figure 2, the top six fake news stories and their correlating memes are shown. In some cases, the fake news story was published and distributed first and a corresponding meme was created and distributed; in other cases, a popular viral meme was widely circulated prior to a fake news story’s publication. I found that in cases where the “fake” meme was created first, the meme received more views, shares, and likes. Whereas if the fake news story was circulated first, the meme received less social media engagement. However, in both instances the virality of each medium helped circulate the spread of the other. If the meme was years old, like the Florida man meme created in 2013, the fake news article published in 2016 caused a spike in the creation of Florida man memes. If the meme was viral at the same time as the publication of the fake news article, the article received boosted recognition. An example of this are the clown memes that circulated on Twitter and Tumblr. After the widespread hysteria about killer clowns, fake news articles about clown crimes collected increased shares, likes and comments on Facebook. This symbiotic relationship between fake news and memes presented itself in 38% of the top 50 news articles of 2016.

Conclusion

From my research, I have concluded that “fake” memes constitute a distinct meme subgenre. Like most meme subgenres, they do not contain a unifying subject matter; rather, they contain the same function of perpetuating subject matter for fake news or aiding the virality of a fake news article. This function of “fake” memes is extremely important for internet users to understand, because spotting “fake” memes can help users more easily differentiate between factual information and fake news. Understanding “fake” memes helps users see how fake news is spread and the part memes play in its propagation.

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